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Talking about Happiness: Interview Research and Well-Being

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Abstract: In addition to teaching research and writing skills, First-Year Composition classes are well situated to help students develop strategies for managing stress and increasing well-being. I describe an assignment sequence in which students interview others from three generations about topics related to happiness and well-being, analyze shared transcripts, and present their findings in two genres. Beyond providing instruction in research methods, academic writing, and multimodal composing for non-academic audiences, this sequence supports the five elements of authentic well-being outlined by positive psychologist Martin Seligman: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment. These assignments and related course content foster emotional literacy by prompting students to approach happiness and well-being as academic subjects and to develop practical strategies for implementing what they've learned.

Research attests to growing rates of stress and mental illness among college students. According to the 2015 Annual Report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, student depression and anxiety have increased consistently since 2010, and “the growth in number of students seeking services at counseling centers (+29.6%) was more than 5x the rate of institutional enrollment (+5.6%)” (2). In addition to the usual pressures of college, numerous mood disorders often manifest in late adolescence or early adulthood. Because composition instructors work with students during the difficult first year, and in small enough classes to form personal relationships, students often confide in us when they are struggling, and we see the toll stress takes even on students with no mental illness. At my university, we are fortunate to have strong campus resources for students affected by excessive stress or mental illness, and faculty are well informed about how to refer students for professional help. Still, as a writing professor, I wondered if there was more I could do to help *all* of my students develop a better understanding of mental health and of ways to improve their own well-being.

Some may question whether such a goal is appropriate for first-year classes taught by instructors who (usually) aren't experts in psychology. English professor Catherine Savini responded to such concerns recently in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

It is tempting to say, ‘We should leave mental health to the experts.’ I have said that myself. But now I recognize that asking students to leave their mental-health issues at the door is not only unreasonable, it's unjust . . . Of course, we should direct students to the experts when they are in crisis, but there's much we can do without positioning ourselves as therapists or saviors.

One thing we can do is emphasize mental well-being and practices that can benefit all students. Much like Universal Design for Learning, teaching for mental health includes practices that won't hurt anyone but might really help someone. For example, Savini encourages professors to abandon intolerant policies that may add stress but don't add to learning, while panels at CCCC 2016 encouraged mindfulness practices for writing students and faculty. The assignment I discuss below is part of a course focused on the study of mental health and happiness, but I now include “happy moments” in every class I teach, whether that's through fun applications of course concepts, a moment of meditation when students are frazzled, or pictures of puppies in my PowerPoints. Writing is hard, but it doesn't have to be joyless.

Students may expect required writing classes to cause stress and unhappiness; however, as I will explain, we are actually well situated to help students develop healthy writing processes and other strategies for managing stress and increasing well-being. With this goal in mind, I designed “The Pursuit of Happiness,” a Research and Writing(1)

course that asks students to investigate mental health and happiness from multiple angles and disciplinary perspectives. While writing about emotions has traditionally been associated with expressivist pedagogies or personal essays, this class situates mental health and happiness as objects of academic inquiry, meeting common curriculum requirements while fostering emotional literacy.

In addition to assigning reading and writing about mental health topics, several assignments and lesson plans integrate aspects of positive psychology. I learned about positive psychology from my own therapist and soon realized that some of its principles could benefit my students as well. Positive psychology emerged as a field of study and practice in the 1990s, largely through the efforts of Martin Seligman and the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. While traditional psychology focuses on treating disorders (making people less miserable), positive psychology promotes well-being (making people “happier”) through the study of positive emotion, positive traits, and positive institutions (*Authentic Happiness* ix-xi). Regarding educational institutions, Seligman suggests that positive psychology should be included in a range of academic curricula: “Two good reasons that well-being should be taught in schools are the current flood of depression and the nominal increase in happiness over the last two generations. A third good reason is that greater well-being enhances learning . . . Positive mood produces broader attention, more creative thinking, and more holistic thinking” (*Flourish* 80). In describing the Geelong Grammar School project, Seligman demonstrates the benefits of adding positive psychology to the curriculum through both explicit content and more integrated wellness-building strategies (*Flourish* 85-92). Below, I describe an interview-based research project that enacts this approach. It introduces key research and writing skills while encouraging students to think about how we define, experience, and promote happiness. In addition, the structure of this unit supports the five elements of authentic well-being outlined by Seligman: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment (*Flourish* 24).

Prior to this unit, students develop annotated bibliographies about a variety of mental health topics, and we read several academic studies of happiness and well-being together. At the start of this research sequence, we draw on these texts to develop research questions and work collaboratively on a shared interview protocol that includes the following: demographic data; Likert scales for self-reported levels of happiness and life satisfaction; and several open-ended questions about how participants define happiness, what brings them happiness, what they might change to increase their happiness, and the like. Students use a Google Form to submit transcribed responses to a shared spreadsheet, which they then download for analysis from different angles. In recent classes, for example, we read about the U-shaped or upward trajectories of people’s happiness over time (Frijters and Beatton) as well as the role of cultural constructions in how people *think* happiness changes as they age (Lacey et al.). Many students applied these concepts as they compared responses about levels and causes of happiness across age groups. We also read excerpts from *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*, in which Daniel Nettle (much like Seligman) defines three levels of happiness: (1) momentary pleasures and joy, (2) well-being and satisfaction, and (3) flourishing and fulfilling one’s potential. Some students then studied how interview participants defined happiness and described three things that make them happy, coding these qualitative responses within Nettle’s taxonomy.

During this assignment sequence, students choose secondary sources, devise critical frameworks, and decide which and how many variables to study based on their own interests, abilities, and levels of commitment. This flexibility and the hands-on nature of the project increase student engagement. As one student wrote in her reflection on this project:

I am genuinely interested in the research we are doing and the answers to the questions we are asking, so I enjoyed the opportunity to learn about happiness and dip a toe into the intriguing field of positive psychology. The people I interviewed are ones who I know to be happy from being around them and I was already curious as to what made them so. I’ve definitely learned from this and hope I can use my new knowledge to better the lives of others. (Guaitieri)

When asked to reflect on their interview conversations, many students reported that these conversations not only provided data, but also fostered positive emotions and relationships. All students interview three people they know: someone close to their age, someone near their parents’ age, and someone in their grandparents’ generation.^[2] Interviewing their peers encourages students to reflect on what makes their generation happy and may help them see more positives in their own lives. Interviewing people their parents’ and grandparents’ age helps students understand their elders’ values and how levels and sources of happiness change over time. When asked what they liked and disliked about conducting the interviews, over two-thirds of the students mentioned that they enjoyed connecting with and learning more about the participants. One student captured common sentiments:

The targeted questions allowed the interviewee to share their stories with me, and for this topic, they were happy stories that made me feel a sense of joy while listening. For my interviews, I talked with my mom, an elderly mentor of mine, and a college friend. Through these conversations, I felt I was able to get to know the person more deeply and strengthen our relationship. Although this does not necessarily

have direct research value, I appreciated this outcome and it was an added plus to the experience.
(Anthony)

After compiling and analyzing the interviews, students share their results in two related projects. First, they present their findings in an APA-style report with an Introduction and Literature Review, Methods, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD). This genre introduces them to a common format and citation style for the social sciences and invites them to enter the academic discussion of their topic with original research, which increases their sense of engagement with, and investment in, the writing, even if the style is unfamiliar. However, researchers also share findings with non-academic audiences, and I want students to think about how their research can be interesting and useful to lay readers. Therefore, the final stage of the assignment sequence asks students to remediate their primary and secondary research, presenting key findings in another genre such as a magazine article, poster, or video. When students recognize that their research can help others, it often adds a greater sense of meaning and purpose for their work. Adapting their work for a popular audience also allows students to bring their experiences and voices to the writing, to offer advice based on their findings, and to hone different composing strategies, such as developing their emotional appeals and visual rhetoric. Recently, one student converted an objective discussion of correlations between happiness levels, profession, and income into an engaging video for college students; she explained that status and money do not buy happiness, so young people should also consider their passions, strengths, and potential fulfillment when choosing majors and careers. Another used data about causes for happiness in our older population to develop a brochure for adult caregivers about the importance of providing creative activities and fostering relationships for seniors.

As students complete this unit, they feel a strong sense of accomplishment. Many have never written such a substantial research project, and most have never considered how generating new knowledge and sharing it with others can be a creative and fulfilling process. This unit and related course content also contribute to students' emotional literacy as they develop an academic understanding of well-being and practical strategies for implementing what they've learned. In a voluntary, anonymous survey completed after spring quarter, 93 percent of students ($n=29$) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "This class improved my understanding of different definitions or types of happiness," and 78.5 percent agreed or strongly agreed with "This class taught me useful strategies for improving my own happiness." This is obviously a very limited sample, but I find it encouraging.

Without wider application and assessment, we won't know if happiness-related content and activities lead to improved well-being in the long run. In the moment, however, they promote a positive mood in the classroom and encourage students to engage more fully in the task at hand, making it easier for them to learn course content and meet educational outcomes. That should make everyone happy.

Appendix

The Appendix is available in two formats:

1. [Talking About Happiness: Interview Project Sequence](#) (modifiable Word-compatible .doc)
2. [Talking About Happiness: Interview Project Sequence](#) (.pdf)

Notes

1. Research and Writing is the second course in our first-year writing sequence; it emphasizes research traditions (text-based, qualitative, and quantitative), requires students to complete primary research, and encourages writing for multiple audiences. While all sections meet the same course goals, professors are able to design their courses around a theme of their choice. ([Return to text.](#))
2. We discussed benefits and drawbacks of interviewing people students know. On one hand, it made them more comfortable during their early practice, and several students said they enjoyed the chance to talk with friends and family about these issues. On the other hand, such relationships influence results; as one student joked, "Your mom probably isn't going to tell you that you destroyed her happiness." ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 34 table of contents](#).

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